The Anderson Institute  
United States of America

**Cultural Perception of Time**

Often, when we are immersed in our own culture, it is difficult to understand how those from other ethnicities perceive our culture, customs, and way of life. In addition, some aspects of our culture are so ingrained in our minds and so commonplace to us that we begin to feel they are universally accepted.

One of these cultural variables is a person’s perception of time. Most people have their own idea of what time is and give little thought to the possibility that their definition could be different from anyone else’s. For instance, it would not occur to someone living in most parts of the world today that the future couldn’t possibly exist. However, the people of Piraha heritage living in the Amazon have no concept of time beyond the present so the concept of future for them doesn’t exist. They don’t even have a word for the concept of “future” in their vocabulary. Because we can’t envision it, does that mean it cannot be?

Time also has a huge effect on interpersonal relations within a society. No? Would you want to be late for your wedding or an important job interview? Think of the problems that would result if you thought nothing of showing up to work two hours late each day. Or think of how aggravated your employees would be if you regularly held committee meetings hours longer than scheduled. Our understanding of and attitude towards time affects us and those around us. To fully understand the fascinating dynamics of the abstract, concrete, relative, and universal properties of time that govern the way we live, we must first examine the ways in which people around the world view and use their time within their lives each day.

**Pace Yourself: The Pace of Time around the Globe**

*"Anthropologists list the toughest things to cope with in a foreign land. Second only to language is the way we deal with time" (Lienhard).*

Think carefully for a moment about the place where you live and your everyday life: your country, your culture, your town or city, your daily habits and customs? What is the pace of life in the society that you live in? Is it rushed and fast paced most of the time, or slow and tranquil? Maybe the pace of your society is a mixture of both, or it shifts between the two extremes. All around the world, people are living their daily lives at a different pace. Of course, the pace of life is relative. Most countries, cultures, or societies, can be associated with a pace that can be described as either comparatively fast, or comparatively slow.

There have been a great number of studies done about that aspect of time and life called pace. Researchers have traveled around the globe collecting data and collaborating with colleagues to give them some idea of what the pace of time is like in various countries and cultures. A common denominator in many of these studies concerns walking pace—testing how fast people walk in the cities and towns of various countries. Do you feel that you take your time when you walk, or are you more often rushing to get somewhere? Other common data collection methods include checking the accuracy of important town clocks, and timing simple, local business transactions.

One particular study that used all three of these methods was successful in collecting data from 31 different countries. Specifically, the study tested the following things:

“(1) walking speed—the speed with which pedestrians in downtown areas walk a distance of 60 feet;

(2) work speed—how quickly postal clerks complete a standard request to purchase a stamp; and

(3) the accuracy of public clocks” (Levine). As a result, this study found that Japan and a collection of Western European countries had the fastest pace. Switzerland was a top contender, in particular because of the accuracy of its clocks.

“Whether Japan or Switzerland deserves the gold medal for speed remains an arguable issue, but without question the most remarkable finding at the front end of the rankings was the consistently fast scores from Western Europe. Eight of the nine Western European countries tested (Switzerland, Ireland, Germany, Italy, England, Sweden, Austria, and the Netherlands) were faster than every other country other than Japan” (Levine).

Other studies have found that the United States also tends to come in as an extremely fast-paced country—in many cases competing with Japan for the fastest pace. Within the United States, Boston and Kansas City have been seen as two of the fastest paced individual cities (Lienhard). After reviewing the results of these studies, it almost seems as if these fast paced countries are in a race to get through life as quickly and as efficiently as they can each day.

As time goes on, slower-paced countries and cultures are harder and harder to find. Unlike America and the Western European countries mentioned above, “Being late to an appointment, or taking a long time to get down to business, is the accepted norm in most Mediterranean and Arab countries” (Devereaux and Johanson). Latin American countries and Native American countries are also known to have a slower paced lifestyle, partially due to the fact that much of their lifestyle is controlled by the past, whereas fast-paced countries like America are constantly rushing into the future. Although Italy tends to be placed among the faster paced countries, it too has been regarded as a slower-paced country by some, when compared to its fellow Western European neighbors.

“Italians take things slow — they wander, they spend hours at a table talking about their family and their church, they ride bikes instead of driving cars. They do not really have a schedule, except for their scheduled breaks. This is especially hard for us to comprehend” (King).

Greece is another European country that most people consider, without question, to be slow-paced. In an article about vacationing in Greece, one person reflects that visitors to this country are tempted to simply “…let the day unfold. Slow your pace of life to that of the locals, philosophize, read a good book, bathe, snooze” (Whitaker). After learning about these two lifestyles, which kind of pace do you think your world runs on? Which pace would you rather it ran on?

There is a common tie-in between the faster-paced countries of the world. Usually, what is found in these studies is that the more industrialized and economically developed a country is, the more fast-paced it will be. Less developed or developing countries tend to have slower paced lifestyles (Levine and Norenzayan). As the world continues moving forward, both technologically and economically, faster paced lifestyles are working their way into more and more countries and cultures. Still, many people who live in a fast paced society should keep in mind that it is important to slow down every once in a while. A healthy balance of fast-pace and slower-pace may be key to a happier, healthier and more smoothly run daily life.

**Time in Our Lives: The Role of Time in Various Cultures**

Not everyone in the world views the concept of time in the same way. In fact, some cultures don’t even make time a part of their lives. Some cultures are wary of time passing by, while others run their lives by the clock. Imagine for a moment what would happen if you took someone living in a hectic society controlled by time and let them switch lives with a second person living in a culture without time. How do you think the two individuals would react? Would the first person be able to function without a schedule? Would the second be able to function with one? This article explores three distinct versions of cultures and their views on time: cultures run by time, cultures without time, and cultures with unique perspectives on time. Each category gives two examples of specific cultures which represent that category.

**Cultures Run by Time**

■The United States of America: It would be safe to say that, very often, the cultures that are run by time are those which appear to have the fastest pace. The United States—as one of the fastest paced societies of the world—fits this idea completely. Most people from the United States can honestly say that they often feel rushed. This may be partly due to the fact that many Americans strive for the “American Dream,”—the epitome of success, luxury and happiness. The concept is often regarded as an illusion; yet but pressuring its citizens to constantly do more, earn more, and consume more—in order to achieve more—the ideals of American society drive people to constantly be in a hurried state of mind. Time decides when Americans make their appointments, when they do their work, and even how they spend their leisure time. “For many Americans the ‘free moments’ that once glued a busy life together have almost disappeared” (Whybrow 159). In the United States, time is undoubtedly in control of the everyday lives of most people.

■Japan: The Japanese live lives that are run by time, as do the Americans. Still, the Japanese tend to feel less rushed and frustrated with this fact than the Americans do; they seem to have achieved a greater handle on time management and extremely efficient lifestyles. The Japanese run on time because of their extremely low tolerance for tardiness and delay. If American deadlines and meeting times are said to be strict, than the same aspects in Japanese culture would be even stricter. A great example of this rigid view toward promptness can be seen in the Japanese train system. “In most European railway systems, a ‘delay’ is defined as ‘10-15 minutes behind schedule.’ In other words, for example, ‘14 minutes behind schedule’ is still counted as ‘on time.’ This is how European railway companies are able to obtain high punctuality. On the other hand, the definition of ‘delay’ in Japan is more severe; only trains with less than a minute’s delay is defined as ‘on time” (Mito).

**Cultures without Time**

■The Pirahã Tribe: This small native tribe of the Amazon rainforest has an extremely limited language of humming and whistling (Davies). They use no numbers, letters, or art; and—more importantly—no concept of time. Specialists such as linguist Dan Everett have traveled to the isolated Pirahã villages of Brazil in order to attempt to teach the tribe how to read and write (Davies). Their attempts have generally been unsuccessful. To even consider introducing the concept of time to this tribe would be foolish, as their concept of numbers is non existent. They have no specific religious beliefs—no reverence to ancestors or heroes of the past.   
There is no past tense…because everything exists for them in the present. When it can no longer be perceived, it ceases, to all intents, to exist… The linguistic limitations of this "carpe diem" culture explain why the Pirahã have no desire to remember where they come from and why they tell no stories (Davies). So, although it may be difficult for many people in time-dependent cultures to understand the ways of the Pirahã tribe, there is an important lesson in their relaxed lifestyle—encouraging people to live every moment for what it’s worth.

■The Hopi Tribe: The Hopi Indian tribe is known for their interesting language: due to its lack of verb tenses and resulting omission of any conception of time. The closest that the Hopi language comes to a sense of time are two words in the entire language: one meaning “sooner” and another meaning “later” (Le Lionnais). The Hopi tribes live, for the most part, in northeast Arizona. They make their homes atop flattened sections of hills called Mesas, in villages called “pueblos” (“Hopi Indians”). The Hopi Indians are also well known for being a very peaceful tribe.

**Cultures with Unique Views on Time**

■Nomadic Tribes of Afghanistan and Iran: These peoples of nomadic tribes do not feel tied down by time in any other for than the seasons. In the spring, they migrate from the valleys to the mountains, where they will find richer and more abundant grasslands for their animals (Goudsmit and Claiborne). When the warm days of summer have passed, the nomads head back to the valleys from which they came in spring. Often this is a fairly long journey. This cycle continues throughout their entire lives.

■Asian Buddhist Culture: Although the system of months that so many people live by today is a lunar concept, the strictly lunar aspect is sometimes given little thought. Buddhists have a stricter lunar calendar, because the moon has always been to them “…an object of wonder and veneration” (Goudsmit and Claiborne). Buddhist monks meet for prayer twice in one lunar month, at the beginning and end of the lunar cycle. The Buddhist calendar consists of 12 months. Throughout the year, the days in each month alternate from 29 to 30 (“Buddhist Calendar”)—making each month shorter, on average, than the months that many other modern societies are used to.